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## THE DEVIL THAT KNOWS US BEST

He assails our virtue and our peace under many disguises ; but since I have grown acquainted with his character I have called him The Devil that Knows Us Best. His diabolic triumph lies just in this—that he does know us best. At the age when one refuses to believe that a rational world can harbor devils, but is intently preoccupied with that half-fledged thing, one's own soul, I read, and remembered with morbid interest,—

“Imps in eager caucus  
Raffle for my soul.”

That is not the way of this devil. He waits ; he snaps up bargains ; he gets us cheap.

He first assumed personality for me during an hour meekly and dutifully given to my own profession. Nothing could be farther from the truth than the notion some other demon has disseminated in the world, that whoever withdraws into his professional sanctum—in honest English, whoever is minding his job—is thereby marooned away from “human experience.” Admit a man into any business whatsoever, not absolutely solitary, and you open to his view an endless tragicomedy of human nature—grotesque, diverting, heroic—fleeing and pursuing the world, the flesh, and the devil. Especially if his business ever places him in any assembly of men, from a kirk to a congress, may he hope for rich glimpses of what we call real life. In the way of duty, then, I was present at a gathering of men and women : to wit, a faculty meeting. The question under discussion was whether a group of students who supposed themselves to be philosophical anarchists might be allowed to hold a public meeting and invite a speaker. Grave concern sat on every brow. We felt the foundations of the college shaken beneath our feet. The professor of literature had lent his deep voice, his saturnine presence, his marvelous command of English, to the cause of the opposition. In slow and scornful words he had characterized the folly and the insolence of the request laid before us, and had dismissed it from our notice. The professor of philosophy enveloped the question in silken phrases, from which at length

we disentangled the idea that at any cost, and to all time, he stood for academic freedom. Toward the end of his speech there grew upon me the fancy that I had the gift to see and hear some things to others imperceptible. Gliding about in the more shadowy parts of the room I saw—or chose to think I saw—a person of diminutive stature, whom by degrees I made out to be sleekly dressed, sad and solicitous in countenance. I saw him slipping up to whisper in the ear of certain younger colleagues as they listened, outwardly cold but inwardly sympathetic, to the professor of philosophy. When that master of rhetoric concluded, one of these younger ones, a woman, sat up tensely as if to rise. But the unseen visitor was by her side, muttering, “Your position, your position—you can’t afford to risk it.” Through the rest of that weary afternoon I diverted myself with this fantasy. The president himself, who was visibly controlling an impulse to surrender the chair and take the floor, seemed the favorite of our visitor. To the president his voice was sometimes “trustees, trustees”; sometimes, “the Wayland money—shall we lose it?” Then in a moment he would be at someone else’s shoulder, whispering “the president—the president—what does the president think?” I saw the stern face of the professor of literature grow a shade sterner; presently I caught a flicker of pain in the face of the professor of philosophy. Opposed as they were in every conception, principle, and feeling, I knew the same thought had stung them both—“my influence among the students—have I endangered it?” To the professor of Hebrew, who was known as a hard man, our diabolic visitant spoke a very different language. To him he imparted deadly fears; fears that the youth of our time would grow up godless and lawless, visions of fair countrysides blasted by revolution. For most, however, the whisperer had but three refrains: the president—the trustees—my position, my position, my position. Ostensibly our discussion marched upon a highroad, with peace of mind on certain issues as our goal; but in fact every separate speaker or listener was off in a separate thicket or morass or bypath, goaded by the insistent voice in his ear, or striving to drown it out with brave words of his own; and collectively we reached no place whatever.

Since that day I have never been present at academic deliberations without mischievous reminiscences of the figure my imagination conjured out of the shadows then, and mischievous guesses as to the seed he may still be sowing in secret under cover of our aloof, impersonal discussions. I have not thereby learned to despise my colleagues, nor my equally vulnerable self. If despicable motives were the sole ones through which our friend the devil worked, life would be simple indeed. He has made of our good professor of Hebrew an obstructionist, a man who dares not trust humanity with its own future. But he can do this just because only a noble soul forgets itself in either hopes or fears for humanity. The instructors who tremble for their places are not poltroons. If in that hour of whimsical insight it was given me to understand anything at all, I am sure of that. Some of them, *mutatis mutandis*, were in much the state of mind of the poor clergyman who, having heard Sydney Smith make a vigorous speech for an unpopular cause, just afterwards—so Smith relates—“whispered to me that he was quite of my way of thinking, but had nine children.” Suppose he had faced the storm; suppose the nine children had consequently come to want—righteous people in the main would have counted the poor clergyman worse than an infidel. That is the ordinary judgment to-day of the laboring man who involves his family in the hardships incident to a strike. But in the long run it is for the sake of his children that the workingman strikes. Now the teacher who has others dependent on him knows that by his resignation his family has very little to gain and very much to lose. Hence—under whatever provocation of inadequate salary, unjust dismissal of fellow-teachers, or betrayal of the most sacred educational aims—he strikes very seldom. He is afraid rather of a lockout. Rightly or wrongly—very often wrongly—he is afraid lest a too-outspoken championing of minority views should lead to the discovery that he is “not in harmony” with the institution where he has worked. Should he brave the storm and bring down unpleasant consequences on himself and his family, there will be those to call him also worse than an infidel. And if, in face of injustice or strong difference of opinion, he smothers generous and venturesome impulses because a voice is dinning

in his ear, "Your position, your position—your family, your family," he may scarcely know himself whether the voice has been that of his better angel or of his familiar devil.

It is a shallow error, though, to suppose that in his sometimes almost morbid nervousness over his position, the teacher has only salary and material comfort, even for others, in his mind. His position means his chance for work—work that he can do wholeheartedly and therefore well; work that provides use for all the wisdom he may have garnered from books or life; work that puts the salt of sincerity into his dreams and aspirations for humanity at large. These things the devil of inhibition who knows all our stops and plays upon them, divines but too clearly.

As with the teacher, so with the rest of mankind. The bravest turn coward if harried too grievously; and sometimes the means to bring them to this intolerable pass lie in the finest qualities of their nature. We are not speaking, naturally, of the fears evoked in us by outer circumstance—the terror of approaching blindness, the fear of lightning and of fire. There is nothing to be concerned about in the maniac fears that occasionally flit over every mind, such as the fear that one may commit suicide in one's sleep. There is every reason for concern over the sensible timidities of sensible people. A sane man is not afraid that his house will turn into a tumbleweed, or his food into quicksilver. What the sane man is sometimes horribly afraid of is the thing which very probably may happen, which often enough he has seen happening to others. The vision of revolution before which our professor of Hebrew shudders may indeed become a fact. Those who dread dismissal from their positions have already stood by and seen others dismissed. The spirit that stays a man's hand and freezes words on his lips is a spirit born of his own authentic knowledge of the world. It is the spirit—please allow me to think of him as personal—that lurks by turns in the road, attentive to direct our eyes toward risks. It is the Devil of Reasonable Fear.

Take the case of friendship. Before we are twenty we give ourselves in these relations with an almost divine completeness and trust. There is sometimes much folly mingled with this fresh-hearted devotion; but let that pass. By degrees we dis-

cover the mysterious obstacles to perfect truth of intercourse that exist even in candid hearts. We become aware of times and places where our own sympathies run dry. If we are hot-headed and chivalrous, some friendship may go up in the flame of a quarrel about convictions. Perhaps we make bitter acquaintance with the traitorous friend. After that, so far as our natural temper admits, Reasonable Fear has his own way with us. Our approach to a new friendship is broken now by detours and retreats. Very unjustly sometimes, we no longer hazard so much on a single relation.

"He who has suffered shipwreck, fears to sail  
Upon the seas, though with a gentle gale."

The fashion in which we bear ourselves now may not be gallant. But if we flung ourselves upon experience with the abandon of eighteen,—would that be decent?

Sometimes the tempter has as his emissaries a troop of ancestral ghosts. On the way from the cradle to middle life, all but the happiest-born of us learn, reluctantly enough, melancholy facts of family history—the desperate impracticality of the forebear we most resemble, or his incurable sloth, or his old-man-of-the-sea bad luck. Honorable ventures have failed, through some inscrutable flaw in judgment. Is our judgment made of better stuff? Perhaps there simply bursts upon the mind, in a nerveless hour, a realizing sense of the insufferable tameness of our own intellectual and temperamental heritage. Why should we hope to be better than our fathers? Too surely we see the whole trend of events and character pointing toward iteration of the historic failure, or the historic aridness. It may be partly in propitiation of these family ghosts that we celebrate so resolutely occasions wherein kindred of ours have come off fortunately or courageously. We would brace ourselves by identification with all that is valiant or distinguished in our mingled family history, and we would fain slough off all traditions prophetic of weakness.

Yet these are but passing shadows of fear. The ghosts that really block our pathway are those of our own immediate and incommunicable experiences. Through trial of the world and ourselves we learn distrust. We learn not to stake happiness on

the promises of another; some of us better the instruction to the point of throwing our own rectitude away. We fail and are humiliated, and thereafter we need a double portion of strength to enter a second time on the same undertaking. The talents of fifteen simmer down to the mere aptitudes of thirty. One man puts aside vast projects for little duties, till the little duties become the necessary framework of his life, and the vast projects dissolve from his view. Another, having overworked and broken down, thenceforth underworks through fear of a second crash. Limitations seem to close in about us; and not many of us learn so well as we might to transmute them into power. In our envy of the headlong enterprise of youth, we murmur plaintively, *Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait*. But we are only half right. It is the strength of youth that it does not know some things. It is bitter knowledge that has undone us. When duty, or ambition, whispers low, the *youth* replies, "I can"; and in a measure he can, however absurd the venture, because he does not perceive its absurdity.

Of course the stoutheartedness of youth is not so unshaken as we like to think it. For every conceited young rogue who needs to have the wind taken out of his sails, you can find another youth prematurely given over to fears and scruples. Family disaster or disgrace, though children do not express their thoughts about it, leaves on them a more organic, a more formative impression of discouragement than upon their elders. Think what must go on in the mind of a sensitive child whose father is a drunkard, or in prison. Either through such causes, or through the mere zeal of efficient and devoted elders, forever pruning and correcting, or under influences of introspective piety, children may grow up with a constitutional sense that failure, for them, is laid down in the nature of things. It is devil's work—which some of us unwittingly help along—to becloud the rightful sunny confidence of youth. Plainly, the better fortune of young people lies in no certain exemption from dispiriting influences, but in the chance that, though no maturer person can, they *may* escape such influences. But whether the case be that of young or old, the moral situation is the same. It is not instinct, generally speaking, that makes cowards of us, but experience, striking with

fatal sureness at the point where the individual character is most vulnerable.

Similarly, in the realm of those great ideas, philosophical and social, which confound the intellect, and are yet chiefly worth its endeavor, we grow disheartened as we grow older. We learn, if any noble project is devised for enabling human society to fulfil more nearly its ends of justice and fellowship, to shake our heads and sigh, "Not in our time." The nobler the project, the more completely unnerved we seem by proposals to initiate it, even on the smallest scale, in practice. It is no explanation of these facts, and false besides, to say that conservatism, as such, grows on us with advancing years. All in all, youth is as passionately conservative as any period of life. If you think otherwise of youth, try tampering with some of its ritual observances. It is simply that youth, if we have not corrupted it, is undismayed. Youth sees no reason why the citadel that has remained impregnable for ten thousand years should not be taken to-morrow. For the riddle of the universe, or the riddle of the painful earth, a boy or a girl has a solution ready. Yet it is usually a second-hand solution, thoughtlessly accepted. In growing older, a candid-minded person discovers new merits in the most diverse schemes proposed by others; and that is his strength. He discerns the fallacy bound up in schemes he himself has cherished; and that is his weakness. In the degree of his open-mindedness, he is subject to the temptation to despair of any solution. So far as this despair relates to the great mysteries of existence, one can perhaps put them out of mind, or can make shift with some intellectual *modus vivendi*. But if one despairs about the problems of this present world—about poverty, about the war of races and classes, about the triumph of sordid motives and sordid methods—then his life is stripped of interpretation and of purpose,—that is, of religion.

While one voice calls, Lo here, and another, Lo there, those whose pulses clamor for action, heedless whether the action be valuable or not, can choose one voice and follow it to the end without misgiving. Nor is it always troublesome to them to shift allegiance. Reflective natures have to feel their way more quietly. Even those who themselves set going ideas destined to shatter old



systems—even the Luthers and the Darwins—have their hesitations. The rest of us, neither system-makers nor system-breakers, when we perceive the path of independent thought leading to some surprising goal—socialism, agnosticism, the Catholic Church—are prone to draw back in affright. And in these junctures youth is often as craven as middle age. The sin of such low-spiritedness is not only that it makes the individual's life insipid, robbing it of the sting and the exhilaration of adventure, but also that it is dead weight upon the progress of the world. If the harm stopped with our being deterred by selfish ease, by family and respectability, from acting boldly upon convictions at variance with our traditions, the case would still be bad enough. But the worst is that some of us do not dare go on and arrive at those convictions. A man wakes up suddenly to find himself a potential disciple of some philosophy, socialistic, or anarchistic, or skeptical, which looks as if it might be subversive of all the moral sanctions; and feeling an anxious responsibility for the moral sanctions, he reverts to accepted formulas. Or, it may be, that fear of loneliness which perpetually haunts the human heart, or the fear of giving pain to those who love him, corrupts the thinker. But the horrible fear, the fear that most surely chills and paralyzes our original promptings, is the fear of being fooled. Why should we be right, and so many of the wise and good be in the wrong? To have braved misunderstanding and pain—and after all to be the dupe of one's own reason—

It is an excellent Providence that sweeps the earth clear of each generation in its turn. One is tempted to declare that the race maintains its health and hope by a process comparable with the continual death and renewal of cells in the animal body. Or, to take a more orthodox figure, every new generation is conscript in the warfare against the powers of darkness. Each proves more than half recreant, as its idealistic visions grow fainter and the cost of idealistic action grows plainer; till at length the whole attack must be begun afresh. We can conceive a Power Not Ourselves that Makes for Righteousness and for Growth in Wisdom, dismissing us one by one from the scene, in sheer impatience with our unserviceableness. If we were so made that we could hold fast the wisdom dear-bought

from experience, and yet remain eternally young in our zest for that new venture and new experiment through which progress must come, then we might indeed see the powers of darkness give way. As it is, a very few, with courage and to spare for new quests, are headstrong and petulant, blind to the gains made before their little crusades were thought of. Others—many more—clutch the whole present that they know, evil and good together, with an equal fearfulness of the untried. With this practical fear of the untried goes the intellectual fear of the unknown; the fear of abysmal questions thinly covered by our trim and comfortable creeds. So the progress of our race goes on in halting, perplexed fashion, so the individual life moves lamely; because the demon of prudence, of caution, of plausible fear, has shackled us all. I have called this spirit *The Devil that Knows Us Best*. For each of us falls victim in his own way. Are you loyal? Are you tenderhearted? Are you faithful to your responsibilities? Have you suffered injustice? Has drastic experience taught you common sense? Then through your loyalty, your fellow-feeling, your inescapable obligations, your self-love, your good sense, your enemy will find you out. You shall become wise but no longer original, comprehending more and daring less. With coarse natures the temptation will be coarse; with natures spiritual or keenly intellectual it will be subtle. Deepest irony of all, if anyone escape, we may well ask whether he be not a social outlaw. If you are this devil's cringing slave, you are, more likely than not, a highly respected member of society. You may cower before him, and yet may be a saint. But this is not a world particularly in need of saints. This world needs hearts without fear.

JOSEPHINE M. BURNHAM.

University of Kansas.